

Indian Fields
Near Yorktown
York County
Virginia

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District of Virginia

Historic American Buildings Survey

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RINGFIELD

Near Yorktown, York County, Virginia

At some time before 1640 Captain Robert Felgate patented the land on the south side of the York River between Felgate and King's Creek, later known as Ringfield Plantation. Through Robert's will, probated September 25, 1655, his grandson, Thomas Newton, came into possession of the property. Thomas, a minor, died, and the estate came to William Felgate, whose widow carried it to her second husband, John Underhill. Joseph Ring came into possession through inheritance or purchase in 1692. As two families had been domiciled here for perhaps as much as fifty years there must have been an early house on the site, but there seems to be no reference to it. When Ring wrote his will, however, in 1698 he bequeathed the plantation and house "whereon I now live" to his wife Sarah Mann with remainder to his son Joseph. It would seem certain that this house was the one that was standing as late as 1912 but which since has been burned and the walls have been demolished. Some writers claim that the house, Ringfield, was built in the middle of the seventeenth century. A photograph, however, taken before the fire shows a building which would appear to belong to the period of c. 1700 rather than any earlier, though it might be later.

Joseph Ring, Sr., died in 1702-3 and left an estate valued at £ 1,484, a large sum for that day, the trustees of which were his wife's brothers-in-law, Captain Matthew Page of Rosewell, and Edmund Bartlett. The identity of the latter is more or less vague, and he is sometimes called Berkeley. The former, owner of great Gloucester County estates, was the father of Mann Page, the builder of Rosewell. The size of Ring's fortune and his important family connections, his wife being a Mann of Timberneck Hall, make it seem reasonable that he should have built a new house at the time he purchased the property. The house seen in the photograph would have been one of importance in 1700, though it would not have been twenty-five years later when the example of the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg had spurred the great landowners to the building of mansions such as Rosewell and Stratford.

Ringfield was built of brick, two full stories and an attic in height, with a small wing toward the east. On the first floor it had a central door, flanked by two windows on either side, an arrangement that was duplicated on the second floor, where the door opened onto a gallery or porch, gone when the photograph was taken. The brickwork was laid in Flemish bond, on the facade the headers

being glazed. There was a moulded belt course just above the second-floor line, but it extended only across the heads of the pairs of windows and the intervening wall pier. The windows had flat gauged arches and the gallery door a gauged brick facing as well. The cornice was of wood, fully moulded and enriched with modillions. The end elevation, seen in the photograph, had four small double-hung windows, two on each floor, flanking the chimney. These were spanned by segmental arches formed of header brick. The roof, being gabled, allowed a high gable end in which there were no penetrations, the attic being lighted by three twelve-light gabled dormers on the front of the roof, and probably the same on the rear. The chimneys, in the gable ends, had their outside faces flush with the wall, but were paneled above the intersection with the roof. The shafts, T-shaped in plan, were exceptionally tall and were capped with four corbelled brick courses below a high brick weathering. While the facade had a rather quiet Dutch look expressing affluence and comfortable living the gable ends had a Gothic verticality that showed the needs of the builder to his mediaeval predecessors, and the strong hold of tradition on Virginia architecture.

Unfortunately nothing seems to be known of the interior of the house, but it can be inferred that the plan was but one room deep with a central hall. This would allow two rooms on a floor in addition to an extra room in the east wing, which, judging from the brickwork seen in the photograph, was early if not original. The woodwork of the windows on the exterior was modern, the sash probably once being four lights wide and six high, about the size seen in the ten-light doorway transom. The doors were double, with three richly moulded panels on each leaf.

As has been said above, the house was architecturally an important dwelling of the period. This is true because the seventeenth century was not an era of mansion-building in Virginia. Greenspring seems to have been the only example of an ambitious house of the century, the dwellings built even on important plantations being apparently small in scale and unarchitectural in character. Rosegill, one of the most important, is known to have been merely a group of rather small buildings. There seem to have been very few two-story houses such as Ringfield in the period up to 1725, either in brick or wood. Some surviving examples are Bacon's Castle, Surry County; Indian Banks, Richmond County; St. Anne's Glebe, Essex County; Tuckahoe, Goochland County; Wilton, Westmoreland County; and an important example, now gone, Fairfield, in Gloucester County.

It is unfortunate that Ringfield burned before steps could have been taken for its preservation, but it would seem

wise even now to preserve the remains from further decay. The site is now a part of the Navy Mine Depot, but it is presumed that due to its location it will soon become attached to the Colonial National Historical Parkway. The old approach avenue could be opened up and the house site investigated, then graded to show the top of the walls just above the turf. The graveyard, with the fine heraldic tombs of Joseph Ring and his family, should be protected and made accessible to visitors. The location of Underhill tombs said to remain should also be investigated.

--Thomas T. Waterman, "Architectural Report on Ringfield"
1940